

Dear parishioners,

Our Gospel for today comes from John 17:11-19 where Jesus is praying for his disciples. Jesus is aware that his death awaits him and he continues his preparation for his followers to bear their witness without him. In this prayer, Jesus prays an interesting thing: “I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but to protect them from the evil one” (17:15). Jesus declares that it is not life from which we are saved. Salvation means a rescue from the powers and forces, within and without, that destroy life and corrupt its meaning. I heard told the story of an old man who always prayed from Psalm 55 at a weekly prayer meeting, “O that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest.” But one evening, someone, tired of this weekly life-weary recital, mumbled, “Stick another feather in him, Lord, and let him go!”

Our problem is that we wish for heaven prematurely. In some Christian traditions, the gospel is reduced to being saved and going to heaven. The whole realm of discipleship in this world – other than recruiting other saved individuals – is overlooked. John’s Jesus thinks this is a danger for Christians after Jesus’ death.

However, when we dare to be Christ’s witness in, and for this world, we notice a peace and serenity that can outreach the rush for heaven’s consolations. Jesus, in all of the gospels, tells us that when we care for the worldly needs of persons and society, we notice a quiet joy beyond all of the suffering and injustices we see. Yes, we can “burn out” in going this way. But the quickie-heaven folks experience the same thing. We must have places and structures that care for those who dive into the human mess and get worn out in the struggle. Even in our worn out moments, we can have a satisfaction that beats getting to heaven too quickly.

Jesus does not want to fish us out of this world prematurely. He simply wants a shield against the evil that wears down our worldly witness and work. This does not mean that heaven has no meaning, or includes no hope for us. Granted, a few Christian theologians have renounced belief in a life after death. They often just depict at death our falling into the eternal ocean of God, like a drop of water. Conscious personality is not part of their convictions, but such a view is a tragic one. There is too much unresolved suffering for us not to care about those who never had a chance in life. And when Christians and people of other religious traditions have done their best for justice and love in this world, we must think of them too, being received into God’s eternal grace. Heaven is an undeniable must, even for worldly Christians. Our only problem is that we want to get there too soon. Perhaps Jesus’ prayer will keep us focussed on the tasks at hand.

Yours in Christ,

Fr Robert